

Message Text

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COMNAVTELCOM WASHDC

USCINCEUR VAIHINGEN

COMIDEASTFOR

NAVCOMMUNIT ASMARA

NAVCOMMSTA NEA MAKRI

CNO WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L ASMARA 0579

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINS PINT ET

SUBJECT: ELDERS COMMITTEE MEETS WITH ELF REPS.

REF: ASMARA 0571 (DTG 211140Z JUL 76)

1. CONGEN HAS RECEIVED A REPORT OF A DISCUSSION WITH A MEMBER OF THE DELEGATION OF ERITREAN ELDERS WHO MET WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF THE ELF ON JULY 15 AND 16. IT SHOULD BE NOTED THAT SEVERAL MATERIAL FACTS ARE AT VARIANCE WITH THE PRELIMINARY REPORT SUBMITTED IN PARA 3 REFTEL.

2. THIRTEEN OF THE 14 ELDERS RETURNED TO ASMARA BY AIR ON THE AFTERNOON OF JULY 20. THE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS PROVIDED TO THE CONGEN ARE ESSENTIALLY AS FOLLOWS. THE DELEGATION (14 FROM ASMARA
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AND TWO ERITREAN ELDERS WHO JOINED IN KEREN) DEPARTED KEREN

THE MORNING OF JULY 14 AND AT A CATHOLIC MISSION 3 KM. FROM KEREN THEY MET ELF GUIDES. THEY WERE ORIGINALLY TO MEET THE GUIDES AT HAGAZ (AKA HAGGET), HOWEVER, THIS WAS APPARENTLY CHANGED BECAUSE OF MILITARY ACTIVITY IN THAT AREA. THE DELEGATION PROCEEDED IN A SOUTHWESTERLY DIRECTION ON FOOT AND DONKEY FOR 12 HOURS. AS THE TERRAIN WAS MOSTLY DESCENDING, IT SEEMS LIKELY THE FINAL SITE OF THE TALKS WAS ABOUT 25 TO 30 MILES SOUTHWEST OF KEREN.

3. THE MEETING PLACE WAS NOT A VILLAGE, BUT RATHER AN OPEN FIELD AND THE ELDERS SPENT THE NIGHT OF JULY 14 EXPOSED TO THE WEATHER. THE MORNING OF JULY 15 THEY MET THE ELF REPS HEADED BY THE "ADMINISTRATOR" OF THE SETIT GASH PROVINCE. THE ATTITUDE OF THE ELF WAS DISDAINFUL TOWARD THE ELDERS AND THE HOSPITALITY DISPLAYED BY THE PLF IN JUNE WAS NOTABLY ABSENT. WITHOUT MENTIONING THE EPMG'S NINE-POINT DECLARATION, THE ELDERS PRESENTED THE CASE FOR A PEACEFUL SOLUTION TO THE ERITREAN PROBLEM. THE ELF RESPONDED BY DECLARING THAT THE ELDERS DID NOT REPRESENT THE ERITREAN PEOPLE AND THAT THEIR SELECTION WAS AN EPMG-MANIPULATED SHAM. THEY CLAIMED FURTHER THAT IF CERTAIN MEMBERS OF THE PREVIOUS ELDERS COMMITTEE HAD ACCOMPANIED THE DELEGATION, THE ELF WOULD HAVE SEIZED THEM AND HELD THEM PRISONERS BECAUSE THEY ARE CONSIDERED TO BE PAWNS OF THE EPMG. THE ONLY "PAWN" NAME MENTIONED WAS SALEH GULAY, CIVIL ADMINISTRATOR OF KEREN, WHO HAD FAILED TO JOIN THE DELEGATION CLAIMING HE WAS UNWELL.

4. WITH REFERENCE TO THE PROSPECTS FOR TALKS WITH THE EPMG, THE ELF REPS BLUSTERED THAT THEY WOULD TALK TO THE "FASCIST REGIME" WITH BULLETS. THEY THEN SAID THAT ANY TALKS WITH THE EPMG WOULD ONLY TAKE PLACE AFTER THE UNIFICATION OF THE ELF AND THE PLF, WHICH THEY IMPLIED WOULD BE ATTAINED SOON. AN ELDER FROM KEREN SUGGESTED THAT THE ELF SHOULD SUSPEND THEIR INTENSIFYING MILITARY OFFENSIVE IN THE KEREN AREA, AS THE ETHIOPIAN COMMANDER WAS A REASONABLE MAN AND HAD TREATED THE INHABITANTS OF KEREN VERY HUMANELY. THE ELF RESPONSE WAS A SCORNFUL ASSERTION THAT THE OFFENSIVE WOULD CONTINUE, BECAUSE THE ETHIOPIANS MAY BE HUMANE IN KEREN BUT THEY WERE BRUTAL IN THE COUNTRYSIDE. AS FOR THE RESIDENTS OF KEREN, THEY WERE WARNED THAT THEY MUST LEAVE THE CITY OR THEY WOULD BE GROUND UP WITH THE ETHIOPIANS AS THE SURGHUM IS GROUND WITH THE BARLEY. ACCORDING TO THIS REPORT, CONFIDENTIAL

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AT NO POINT DID THE ELF REPS CLAIM TOTAL INDEPENDENCE WAS A PRE-CONDITION FOR TALKS WITH THE EPMG.

5. AFTER TWO DAYS OF ELF POSTURING AND DENUNCIATION OF EPMG ATROCITIES, THE ELDERS WERE DISMISSED WITH A LETTER FROM THE ELF LEADER FROM SETIT GASH TO THE EPMG REJECTING CONCEPT OF A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT AND BELABORING THE ADDIS GOVERNMENT. ON THEIR RETURN TO KEREN, THE ELDERS WITNESSED BOMBING RAIDS IN

THE AREA AROUND KEREN. SPORADIC CLASHES CONTINUED DURING THEIR THREE-DAY LAYOVER IN KEREN AWAITING RETURN TO ASMARA. ON THE EVENING OF JULY 17, INSURGENTS ATTACKED THE ELABERET PLANTATION AND STOLE A LARGE HERD OF CATTLE. LIKEWISE THERE WERE HARRASSING ATTACKS ON THE CITY'S PERIMETER, BUT THE HEAVIEST ACTION WAS KNOWN TO BE TAKING PLACE AT HAGAZ, 25 KM. WEST OF KEREN. THE AIRCRAFT THAT BROUGHT THE ELDERS BACK TO ASMARA DELIVERED ARMS AND AMMUNITION TO THE KEREN GARRISON. AT THE AIRPORT IN ASMARA THEY SAW MORE TROOPS THOUGHT TO BE DESTINED FOR KEREN. OTHER REPORTS STATE THAT 13 TRUCKLOADS OF TROOPS LEFT ASMARA LATE JULY 20 FOR KEREN.

6. COMMENT: THE ASSERTIONS THAT THE UNIFICATION OF THE ELF AND THE PLF MAY BE ACCOMPLISHED SOON COINCIDES WITH REPORTS IN ASMARA THAT A MEETING OF THE TWO FACTIONS IS IMMINENT. IN ANY EVENT, IT IS CLEAR THAT IT IS FRUITLESS FOR THE ELDERS TO MEET WITH THE FACTIONS SEPARATELY, ESPECIALLY IN VIEW OF THE ELF INFLEXIBILITY. IN TERMS OF TIMING, THE ELF OFFENSIVE IN THE KEREN AREA CREATED A VERY SOUR ATMOSPHERE FOR NEGOTIATION, WHICH IS ONE POSSIBLE EXPLANATION FOR THE OFFENSIVE. EVIDENCE, HOWEVER, IS TOO SPARSE TO ENABLE US TO DRAW FIRM CONCLUSIONS AS TO WHY A HEAVY INSURGENT OPERATION WAS TAKING PLACE IN THE GENERAL VICINITY OF THE SCHEDULED TALKS. AMONG OTHER POSSIBLE REASONS FOR THE FIGHTING ARE: (A) THE CONFUSION IN ASMARA IN THE WAKE OF GETACHEW'S DEATH, (B) INSURGENT DETERMINATION TO DEMONSTRATE THEY ARE ALIVE AND KICKING, AND (C) A LONG-STANDING PLAN TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF A LOCAL TARGET OF OPPORTUNITY. WHILE THE EPMG LOSS OF THE HAGAZ GARRISON WOULD BE A MAJOR INSURGENT VICTORY, IT IS CONSIDERED UNLIKELY THAT THE REBELS CURRENTLY HAVE THE STRENGTH NECESSARY TO TAKE KEREN ITSELF.

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